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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR VISITS FOREST REGION - LACKLUSTER
APPROACH TO ELECTIONS

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Ambassador Carter visited N'Zerekore during the week of April 20-25 to familiarize himself with Guinea's forest region and evaluate local progress towards legislative elections later this year. Both local government authorities and the Prefectoral Independent Electoral Commission (CEPI) had no plan in place for organizing elections, nor any mechanism for coordinating election activities. While civil society and youth leaders complained about weak governance and displayed little hope that the country's elections could be transparent, they seemed to be almost completely disengaged from the process. There was a general "wait and see" attitude with little to no apparent civic action or leadership from those best positioned to push for a free and fair process. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) The Ambassador's week-long trip to the Forest Region included a visit to a Chinese owned logging company, the UNHCR refugee camp in Kouankan, and an impressive state-owned agricultural plantation near Guinea's border with Liberia (all to be reported septel). Local meetings in N'Zerekore focused on local government authorities, the prefectoral electoral commission, civil society, and youth associations. The Ambassador also visited an impressive, modern medical clinic operated by American missionaries. The USAID Director, Pol/Econ Chief, Poloff, and DCM OMS also participated in the visit.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT PERSPECTIVE

13. (SBU) The Ambassador's meetings with the local authorities, including the Governor, Deputy Governor, Prefect, and Mayor, indicated a need for increased communication and coordination between the local government and the Prefectoral Independent Electoral Commission (CEPI). The Ambassador pressed the Governor to frequently and publicly assert the government's neutrality with respect to upcoming elections in order to generate confidence on the part of the population. The Ambassador also emphasized that the Governor needs to take the lead in establishing a community mechanism for dialogue and coordination on elections, stressing that such a mechanism needs to be established immediately rather than waiting until a few weeks or months before election day. The Governor acknowledged his role in the upcoming elections and agreed to emphasize his neutrality, and to establish a mechanism for coordination.

14. (SBU) In a separate meeting with the prefect of N'Zerekore, the Ambassador made the same point about the importance of government neutrality. The prefect, who had joined the Ambassador for dinner, said that he was

broadcasting just such an announcement on local radio that evening. He immediately called for a radio and had the mayor tune in to the station until the Ambassador heard the broadcast. The prefect said it was the first public announcement he had made, but that he plans to make more. On the subject of elections, he told the Ambassador that the local government will work with the CEPI to organize elections, but that he is the final authority for his prefecture. "For example, I will make the decision about whether to close the roads and who can be on them," he said. The Ambassador pointed out that observation teams and CEPI members would need to be able to travel. The prefect quickly agreed, but stressed that it was his job to make the official determination, in order to ensure security on voting day.

CEPI WAITING FOR DIRECTION

15. (SBU) The Ambassador met with the CEPI executive officers to discuss their progress on organizing the upcoming elections. The group had been sworn in on March 31, but still lacked operating resources, including a local office. Acknowledging the lack of funds and a local plan of action, the members claimed to be waiting for direction from the National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI) in Conakry. When asked by the Ambassador if they thought the election would be free and fair, the group was not optimistic. They expressed serious concern that the people of the region would not accept the election results and become violent. When pressed by the Ambassador and POLCHIEF to not wait until after the election to take action, CEPI promised to begin working with civil society and the authorities in order to coordinate preparatory activities.

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16. (SBU) The CEPI also expressed fears that the Prefect would not allow them access in order to count votes, and that they could be jailed for trying to monitor the elections. They provided an example of an election monitor that was arrested and detained for trying to observe the elections in 2002. The CEPI requested that the American Embassy help protect them during the elections. The Ambassador noted that unlike previous elections, the upcoming legislative elections are to be co-managed by the Ministry of Interior and the CENI. The Ambassador said that they (the CEPI) needed to take up their role directly rather than sit passively and take instructions from the Prefect.

PASSIVE CIVIL SOCIETY AND YOUTH

17. (SBU) When the Ambassador met with local youth leaders, participants complained that the region's young people are generally ignored by everyone until an elections campaign gets underway. They said that the political parties manipulate the youth, promise to represent them, and then abandon them when the elections are over. They also complained about the lack of information available about the upcoming election. When the Ambassador and POLCHIEF questioned the youth leaders as to what they were doing to ensure a transparent electoral process, they had no answer. One of the youth leaders even said that the youth are passive and prefer to be observers.8 The Ambassador urged them to take action, emphasizing that the voters have a critical role to play in ensuring a fair process.

18. (SBU) The meeting with civil society leaders demonstrated a similar passivity regarding the elections. They complained about the lack of transparency within the political parties, pointing out that because of the national list system, when people vote for a party, they do not necessarily know who the eventual elected representative will be. Meeting participants also said that a lack of private media in the

region poses challenges for a free and fair process. They emphasized that women need to be actively involved in the electoral process, both as candidates and as citizens. PolChief told participants that all of the political parties have told the Embassy that they will make sure at least 30% of their candidates are women, and another 30% youth. PolChief urged civil society leaders to hold the parties to their commitment. A female participant agreed, but said that it would be difficult to find female candidates who are literate.

¶9. (SBU) Civil Society leaders exuded the same passivity as the youth leaders and did not offer any suggestions as to how they would ensure the elections occurred and were fair. When pressed by Polchief to take action, they looked confused as to what their role should be. One of the civil society leaders claimed that the overall passivity of the population is a result of a culture of fear, which is a legacy of the Sekou Toure regime. Polchief challenged that assumption, pointing out that the country's youth do not carry the same legacy. The Ambassador pressed them to take action, and the civil society leaders promised to communicate with other groups to ensure coordination.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) The prefect is a former military officer and has an authoritative, domineering manner. By contrast, the governor seemed meek and very deferential to everyone around him, including his subordinates. These personalities, coupled with the overwhelming passivity on the part of civil society and the local population, suggest that organizing free and fair elections in the forest region is going to be a challenge. The key is pressure from civil society, but they seemed to lack both the motivation and the initiative necessary to advance the process. Everyone expressed a somewhat muted hope for the elections and the positive change they can bring if effectively organized, but contacts seemed to be in a wait and see mode. With elections only six months away, there was very little happening on the local front. END COMMENT.

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